

Joint address by Dwight D. Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles following the nationalisation of the Suez Canal (3 August 1956)


Caption: In a television broadcast on 3 August 1956, the US President, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and the US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, deplore the decision taken by the Egyptian President, Gamal Abdel Nasser, to nationalise the Suez Canal.

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Radio-Television Address by the President and the Secretary of State (Dulles), August 3, 1956

Introduction by President Eisenhower

Good evening, citizens.

All of us, of course, appreciate the tremendous importance of the Suez Canal. Its continuous and effective operation is vital to the economies of our country, indeed, to the economies of almost all of the countries of the world.

So all of us were vastly disturbed when Colonel Nasser a few days ago declared that Egypt intended to nationalize the Suez Canal Company. At that moment, Secretary Dulles was in South America. But as soon as he returned, and because of his great experience, his wisdom in this kind of affair, he went at my request to London to confer with our British and French friends concerning a proper course of action.

This noon he returned. Because of the information he has, and the background he can give you, I instantly asked the television industry to give him a few minutes this evening to explain to you what he can this evening and give you a report on what he has been talking about in London.

Secretary Dulles:

Mr. President, I greatly appreciate what you have said and this opportunity to speak here from the White House about this dangerous, critical Suez situation and to tell the American people, with some background, the kind of thing I have been reporting to you by cable from London and then which we talked over personally here at the White House this afternoon.

Now this trouble about the Suez Canal started about a week ago when President Nasser announced that he was going to take over the operation of the Suez Canal. And at that time he tried to seize the moneys and the property and the personnel of this Universal Suez Canal Company, which is the operating company of that canal.

Now, this act by President Nasser goes far beyond a mere attempt by a government to nationalize companies and properties within its territory which are not international in character, because the Suez Canal and the operating company are international in character.

Now let me give first a little background about the Suez Canal. That is an international waterway which was built by the Universal Suez Canal Company with international funds about a century ago. And then in the year 1888 all of the great powers that were principally concerned with that canal made a treaty providing that the Suez Canal shall be open at all times, in war as well as in peace, to the shipping of all nations on free and equal terms.

Egypt is a party to that treaty and has repeatedly recognized it. And, indeed, only a couple of years ago President Nasser himself reaffirmed the allegiance of Egypt to that treaty. In all the world there is no international waterway as fully internationalized as is the Suez Canal.

Now let me talk about the Universal Suez Canal Company. That is the company that originally built the canal and which, since 1888, has been the means of assuring that the canal would in fact be operated as a free and open international waterway as pledged by the 1888 treaty.

That company itself is a company of an international character. Registered in Egypt, it operates under a franchise given it by the Government of Egypt. Shareholders are of many nationalities, the board of directors is international, and the canal work — the building of the canal and the keeping of it in good repair — is supervised by an international body of engineers.

The job of that company is to see that the canal is open at all hours to the passage of all vessels of all the nations. This means it has to keep the canal in good operating condition; it has to provide qualified pilots for the transit of the ships through the canal; and it must organize and direct the two-way shipping, which is a rather complicated affair because it is very crowded and it is a canal of over 100 miles long and during most of the way ships cannot pass each other — so there is danger of collision. And the organizing of this thing is a very complicated bit of business.

Now here are a few very interesting statistics that I've put down. In 1955, 14,666 ships passed through the canal. They had a tonnage of over 115 million. They flew the flags of more than 40 different nations. They carried the products of all the world.

There are 187 pilots. They are from 13 nations — 56 French, 52 British, 32 Egyptian, 14 Dutch, 11 Norwegian, and so on. Two of the pilots are Americans.

It is, by far, the world's greatest ocean highway. It has nearly three times the traffic that goes through the Panama Canal, where you and I were, Mr. President, just last week.

Now, why did President Nasser suddenly decide to take over this operation of the Suez Canal? Now, he has told us about that in a long speech that he made. And in that speech he didn't for a moment suggest that Egypt would be able to operate the canal better than it was being operated so as to assure better the rights that were granted under the 1888 treaty. The basic reason he gave was that if he took over this canal it would enhance the prestige of Egypt.

He said that Egypt was determined "to score one triumph after another" in order to enhance what he called the "grandeur" of Egypt. And he coupled his action with statements about his ambition to extend his influence from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf.

And also he said that by seizing the Suez Canal he would strike a blow at what he called "Western imperialism." And he thought also that he could exploit the canal so as to produce bigger revenues for Egypt and so retaliate for the failure of the United States and Britain to give Egypt the money to enable it to get started on this \$1 billion-plus Aswan Dam.

Now President Nasser's speech made it absolutely clear that his seizure of the canal company was an angry act of retaliation against fancied grievances. No one reading that speech can doubt for a moment that the canal, under the Egyptian operation, would be used not to carry out the 1888 treaty better but to promote the political and economic ambitions of Egypt and what, as I say, President Nasser calls the "grandeur" of Egypt.

Now, of course, the government of a free and independent country — which Egypt is, and we want to have it always that — should seek to promote by all proper means the welfare of its people. And President Nasser has done much that is good in that respect.

But it is inadmissible that a waterway internationalized by treaty, which is required for the livelihood of a score or more of nations, should be exploited by one country for purely selfish purposes. And that the operating agency which has done so well in handling the Suez Canal in accordance with the 1888 treaty should be struck down by a national act of vengefulness.

To permit this to go unchallenged would be to encourage a breakdown of the international fabric upon which the security and the well-being of all peoples depend.

And the question, Mr. President, as we've agreed, is not *whether* something should be done about this Egyptian act — but *what* should be done about it.

Now, there were some people who counseled immediate forcible action by the governments which felt themselves most directly affected. This, however, would have been contrary to the principles of the United

Nations Charter and would undoubtedly have led to widespread violence endangering the peace of the world.

At London we decided upon a different approach. We decided to call together in conference the nations most directly involved with a view to seeing whether agreement could not be reached upon an adequate and dependable international administration of the canal on terms which would respect, and generously respect, all of the legitimate rights of Egypt.

So today the British Government is calling a conference of 24 nations to be held on August 16. These 24 nations consist of three groups of eight.

First of all, the eight nations which are party to the 1888 treaty — this includes the Soviet Union and Egypt.

Then in the second group there are eight other countries not included in the foregoing category, whose citizens own the greatest volume of traffic that goes through the canal.

And then as a third group there are eight other countries not included in the foregoing categories, whose pattern of international trade shows a special dependence upon the canal.

These nations that are invited are truly representative and have a broad geographical and cultural diversification.

We believe that out of this conference will come a plan for the international operation of the canal which will give assurance that the objectives of the 1888 treaty will in fact be realized and that the canal will continue to be operated by those who feel that it is their duty to serve the international community and not to serve the special interests of any one nation.

This plan should both give security to the nations principally concerned with the canal and also fully protect the legitimate interests of Egypt. Egypt, we believe, should be adequately represented on this operating authority and be assured, also, of a fair and reasonable income for the use of the property, because the canal, although it is internationalized, is on Egyptian territory.

There is every desire that Egypt shall be treated with the utmost fairness. And, also, the owners and the employees of the now dispossessed Universal Canal Company should also, of course, be fairly treated.

If these principles are accepted by the conference, then we believe that they will also be accepted by Egypt.

As you know, Mr. President, it is one thing for a nation to defy just one or two other nations. But it's quite a different thing to defy the considered and sober judgment of many nations — nations which have treaty rights in the canal and which in large part depend for their economic livelihood upon the operation of the canal in accordance with the 1888 treaty.

Now, I've been asked, "What will we do if the conference fails?" My answer to that is that we are not thinking in terms of the conference's failing. But I can say this: We have given no commitments at any time as to what the United States would do in that unhappy contingency.

I repeat, we assume, Mr. President — with you — that the conference will not fail but will succeed. And I believe that by the conference method we will invoke moral forces which are bound to prevail.

Mr. President, you and I have often talked about our Declaration of Independence and the principles that are set forth in that great document. And one of those principles is that to which the founders pledged themselves — that they would pay a decent respect for the opinions of mankind.

I believe, Mr. President, that most people pay decent respect for the opinions of mankind when these are soberly, carefully, and deliberately formulated. And because I believe that, I am confident that out of this

conference there will come a judgment of such moral force that we can be confident that the Suez Canal will go on, as it has for the last 100 years, for the years in the future to serve in peace the interests of mankind.

Concluding Remarks by the President

Mr. Secretary, I think that everybody who hears you this evening will be certain you carried out this latest assignment in accordance with the principle which has always activated you — to uphold the interests of the United States in the international field with due regard for fairness to every other nation and with the objective of promoting peace in the world.

Thank you very much indeed, Mr. Dulles.